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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [MARR](#) [VE](#)
SUBJECT: GOV POSTURES AGAINST GUERRILLAS AND ALLEGED
SUBVERSION

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ABELARDO A. ARIAS FOR 1.4 (D)

Summary

¶1. (C) The Venezuelan Government and Armed Forces are scrambling to assert their authority after a Venezuelan soldier died in a shoot-out with Colombian guerrillas May 17. The military has sent more troops to the border with Colombia, and the GOV has adopted a slightly firmer rhetorical position against the guerrillas. Meanwhile, the GOV has repeatedly emphasized that the armed forces are loyal amidst press reports that the military is investigating subversion within its ranks. After receiving criticism from the opposition that military pay increases were overdue, President Hugo Chavez ordered the Defense Ministry and legislature to raise soldiers' salaries. End summary.

¶2. (U) One Venezuelan soldier died and another was injured during a May 17 shoot-out with Colombian guerrillas in Tachira State near the Colombian border. The GOV reported the deployment of some 700 forces to capture the perpetrators and to brace the region for future attacks, according to press reports. On May 20, the local military command declared it had detained nine armed irregulars who reportedly belonged to the guerrilla column that had attacked the Venezuelan soldiers. Venezuela has dubbed its operation on the border "Plan Sovereignty" and will seek to make the deployment permanent through a plan, published in the Official Gazette May 10, to staff two additional theaters of operations responsible for security along the entire Colombian border.

Who is to Blame?

¶3. (U) During his visit to the region on May 20, Defense Minister Gen. Jorge Luis Garcia Carneiro accused the ELN of shooting the Venezuelan soldiers. President Hugo Chavez told "Alo Presidente" program listeners May 22 the identity of the attackers remained unknown, but he did not rule out the involvement of leftist guerrillas. Tachira Governor Ronald Blanco La Cruz (MVR) blamed the attack on guerrillas, said self-proclaimed Chavistas were among those the GOV had detained, and asked rhetorically why the GOV found telling the truth about the incident difficult, according to June 2 press reports. In a shift from the GOV's former line that all Colombians were welcome in Venezuelan territory as long as they behaved peacefully, Garcia forbade "subversive groups" from using Venezuela as a refuge from Plan Colombia. Vice President Jose Vicente Rangel, who as recently as late April faulted Plan Colombia for upsetting the regional balance of power and for displacing civilians, blamed the incident on the scarcity of Colombian troops at the border.

"We're in Control of the Situation. We Swear."

¶4. (U) Since late April, opposition-aligned newspapers have printed stories about the military trying to crack down on shadowy opposition movements in its ranks while military leaders have taken pains to assert the troops are firmly behind Chavez. Defense Minister Garcia admitted military authorities were questioning a group of soldiers. The Chavez administration also acknowledged in mid-May that "subversive leaflets" had been placed in Venezuelan military installations, but moved quickly to dispel rumors of coup attempts. Chavez attributed the flyers to "imperialism and its internal lackeys" during a May 14 press conference. A front-page article in a pro-Chavez newspaper on May 22 quoted Rangel as saying that no soldiers were willing to support a coup, although some "irresponsible crazies" were plotting.

Blink and You'll Miss It

15. (C) Chavez and elements of the opposition for the moment have agreed on at least two GOV policies concerning the military. National Assembly Deputy Luis Berdugo (Accion

DemocratICA) endorsed the creation of the position of vice minister of defense for intelligence proposed by the pro-Chavez bloc during debate on the Organic Law of the National Armed Forces in late May. Berdugo said such a vice minister's office, if well organized and funded, could help in the fight against drugs and other border crimes. VociFEROUS Chavez opponent Vice Adm. (ret.) Rafael Huizi criticized the GOV for not giving the military the across-the-board salary increase it had been expecting on May 1, Venezuela's Labor Day, according to press reports. Three weeks later, Chavez said during an Alo Presidente broadcast that military salaries were too low. He told the Defense Ministry and the National Assembly to resolve the problem, and said he had ordered that enlisted personnel receive at least the minimum wage. Vice Adm. (ret.) Mario Ivan Carratu told poloff May 25 he thought Chavez had withheld the increase intentionally to identify pockets of dissent.

Comment

16. (C) Although Chavez assured Colombian President Alvaro Uribe in March he would help fight terrorists, he is not yet willing to tag Colombian guerrillas publicly as such. Domestic political considerations appear to be motivating Chavez in his attempt to assure the military and the border region he takes their security seriously. A leaflet campaign does not indicate widespread discontent, yet Chavez is moving quickly to ensure the armed forces, the institution he depends on most, remains under his firm control. The military remains in his grasp for now, but Chavez could lose his grip if he fails to provide for his troops.

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